

5y #1



ONE WOMYN'S
JOURNEY
THROUGH
LESBIAN STUDIES

:::Denser:::

**:::Lesbian culture is too tenuous.
We need something denser:::**

Jane Legion
August 9, 2006

After I got my bachelor's degree I realized that college hadn't taught me most of the things I wanted to know. In fact, most colleges don't even offer most of the things that I, as a lesbian, need to know. What I want is to study and dig deep into the foundation of lesbian culture. Learning is essential to life – and as a lesbian, I realize that no one is going to provide that education for me.

In my search for understanding and a community, I've done a lot of reading. The lesbian community seems to be shriveling away, like a muscle given too little exercise. Pride parades are dominated by the boys and are too commercial. Many lesbian bars have closed – and they weren't a particularly healthy community gathering place even in their heyday.

As a community, we lesbians only become more by learning more; as women and as lesbians we've been denied access to (all kinds of) learning for too long. This zine is a meandering line through my thoughts as I'm trying to educate myself about lesbian literature and lesbian culture – and perhaps this zine will become a means to connect with others who are taking similar journeys and to form a community.

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The terrible nerves of the invert

Since this is the first edition of *Denser* (and I hope there will be many more) I can hardly avoid starting with Radclyffe Hall. *The Well of Loneliness* was the first book I bought after coming out to my family, and buying it was my first act as an *out* lesbian. It was also the first lesbian book that most lesbians have ever read, and by reading it I felt I had a place in a long chain of women, transgressing against sexual mores.

Of course, today no matter where one looks for the discussions of Radclyffe Hall and her work, it seems like these days she's mocked for being overly melodramatic. Everyone seems to agree that she is not a "great" novelist. It's overlooked that Hall attempted an impossible task in *The Well* - to make the argument for tolerance of homosexuality to a repressive disapproving society. By taking on this burden - by choosing this particular audience - she left herself open to attack from both 'phobes and her own people. Perspective is important! It makes a difference in the writing when lesbians write for lesbians, not straight people! Subjectivity is a crucial element in communication, and having our own literature is the an important element in forming, and re-forming, our community.

The best place to start as far as considering *The Well* seems to be the book of criticism *Palatable Poison; Critical Perspectives on The Well of Loneliness*

edited by Laura Doan and Jay Prosser, and published by Columbia University Press, 2002. A lot of these essays are very enjoyable, and there seems to be something for every perspective in the collection. I'd advise starting at the end and reading Terry Castle's Afterward "It was Good, Good, Good.", which although critical retains a sense of humor, and puts forward the best reason to read Hall – because we love her, despite any faults in her novels.

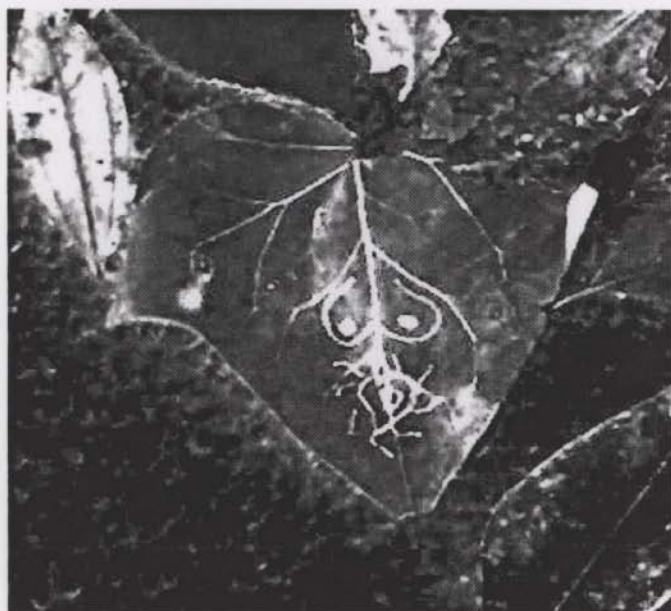
But how many people who aren't academics have read the rest of Hall's works? If not you've missed out on the delicate growth of the young lesbian in *The Unlit Lamp* and the incredible sadness of *Miss Ogilvy*. Radclyffe Hall wrote 8 novels and 7 books of verse; she was a best selling author while she was alive, although the latest fashion criticizes her for having a conservative style. *The Well* itself is often criticized for being too depressing. Does all literature have to be uplifting and innovative? Isn't there space to appreciate Radclyffe Hall's work as a part of our history, and as a particular set of experiences. Must we always put on a happy plucky face?

Hall's poetry is long out of print, and *frankly* out of the price range of most lesbians. My local library has them, but only allows visitors to use them in their rare book room under supervision. A few snippets are available on the internet and here is one of my favorites:

Radclyffe Hall's Novels	
The Forge	1924
The Unlit Lamp	1924
A Saturday Life	1925
Adam's Breed	1926
The Well of Loneliness	1928
The Master of the House	1932
Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself	1934
The Sixth Beatitude	1936
Your John: The Love Letters of Radclyffe Hall	
Radclyffe Hall's Poetry	
Dedicated to Sir Arthur Sullivan	1894
Twixt Earth And Stars	1906
A Sheaf Of Verses : Poems	1908
Poems Of The Past & Present	1910
Songs Of Three Counties And Other Poems	1913
The Forgotten Island	1915
Rhymes and Rhythms	1948

As a lamp of fine crystal, wonderfully
wrought, Is the soul of the woman I love.
—from *The Forgotten Island* 1915

Sally Cline's biography *A Woman Called John* is the best biography of Radclyffe Hall to date. Although fairly standard, it's far superior to the very tabloid biography of Diana Souhami (who incidentally also wrote a terrible biography of Natalie Clifford Barney).



Terry Castle's little book *Noel Coward & Radclyffe Hall; Kindred Spirits*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) gets good reviews. But Castle suggests that many people mock Hall for her melancholy, for taking herself too seriously. Noel Coward's witty satires, and smoothing over of gayness/lesbianism by using the comedy of men in dresses, speaking in falsetto voices are tactics she seems to like better.

So, I invite you all to read Hall's works again. And while you do, consider what writer today writes with the vision and serious dedication of Radclyffe Hall?

Burn Your Rainbow

Since Stonewall, as each of us comes out of the closet as a lesbian, we do so with the idea of a lesbian community that will embrace us and foster us through the difficult process that we all face. We younger queers are fed this idea of a lesbian community. But that community is a myth – a beautiful myth, something we all desperately want and need, magical and wonderful, like unicorns or santa claus. We want and need a community because the phrase “it takes a village...” is a truism; without a community it is hard for any human being to function. But like unicorns, the lesbian community simply *doesn't* exist. Community is something each of us has to renew. We each have to try - and usually fail - to build community for ourselves. And as younger lesbians, the lesbian culture that does exist looks down on us in many ways.

Rally calls like “We paved the way” and quotes, like that in popular fan-fiction author Gina Dartt’s mystery novel *Unexpected Sparks* are ubiquitous in lesbian culture. From the mouth of Dartt’s young romantic lead we learn that:

“I’m not courageous,” she said. “I think it’s just a little easier for my generation. I’ve spoken to older lesbians, and they have stories that would curl your hair...”
(p100)

These examples just show how segregated the lesbian community is based on age-groups. Every lesbian is courageous. As younger dykes, our experiences are viewed as trivially easy, and discounted frequently and vocally. In the eyes of older lesbians it seems like all of the *hard* battles have been fought (and won), and now everyone who wants to come out has a free ride. This of course couldn't be further from the truth. A quote from sociologist Linda Gordon really put in perspective what our society gained from the sexual revolution: "We must notice that the sexual revolution was not a general loosening of sexual taboos but only of those on non-marital heterosexual activity. Indeed so specifically heterosexual was this charge that it tended to intensify taboos on homosexual activity and did much to break patterns of emotional dependency and intensity among women." We're also fighting a backlash against feminism these days. Very very few battles have been *won* .

There are multiple arguments I could give for mutual respect here. It's just plain dumb to try to compete in a race to be the most victimized. Liberal attitudes vary widely across geography, and based on religion and the rural/urban divide. Plenty of older lesbians never faced the horrors that the history books would have us believe; in fact, a lot of older lesbians simply aren't out to more than a few like-minded friends.

There have clearly always been lesbians in some

form. And while the way we are treated as lesbians is always changing, it's always been pretty awful (and parallels the mistreatment of women in general, for women are the "oldest oppressed class"!). And while today Western society treats lesbians very differently than it did 50 years ago, most of us are still treated like shit, and most of us know what it's like to be in the closet, regardless of our age group. We are all wounded.

Generalizations based on age, generalizations made by older lesbians who don't know any young dykes and what we've faced, hurt us all. It's killing that skimpy bond that we'd like to think of as a lesbian community. And if older dykes continue to have the attitude that all younger dykes owe them for our culture and (relative) freedoms, younger dykes will end up resenting our lesbian culture. It's already begun. In the words of the (young) queer-core band, the Skin-Jobs:

And when the kids go... We're gonna
burn your rainbow and we're having fun,
yeah! we don't need you, we don't care -
Burn your Rainbow .

Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Saga of the Renunciates* as a Separatist Utopia

Bradley's *Saga of the Renunciates* revolutionized my world. Before I read this book I thought of separatism as a phenomenon of land dykes – rural farmers who refuse to mix with men under any circumstances. Having grown up in a rural setting, and being someone into technology and the modern world, that sounds really unappealing to me!

Bradley's book opened my mind to the possibility of urban separatist collectives, and of being separatist under select circumstances. We can be part-time lesbian separatists – at home but not at work for instance, or separating for specific lesbian community events. We can have separate lesbian spaces that we can enter and leave throughout the day– a lesbian coffee house, a lesbian newspaper, etc. Bradley brings us into a society of women governed by feminist principles, living together and separate from men – but working inside a large urban center, and often working outside of their women-only group. Instead of setting her feminist separatist society on an all-women planet, as so many lesbian sci-fi books do, Bradley places them in a guild-house, and thereby allows them the conscious choice of separatism within a hetero-patriarchal society. This last point makes the *Renunciate* books some of the most interesting and compelling lesbian feminist books ever writ-

ten.

Bradley's Renunciate books lead me deeper – to Dana Shugar's scholarly analysis of separatist communities "Separatism and Women's Community," and to several discussions of the Beguines, a mystical grassroots group of women that formed non-secluded, urban quasi-nunneries in the middle ages. It lead me to internet resources and email lists.

It seems to me that the idea of separatism is something really important and not something openly examined in the larger lesbian community. The idea that we should spend our energies on one another first, not indiscriminately is crucial to developing a community.

Bradley brings up all of these issues: women's communities, the value of separate spaces, the primacy of friendships between women, the figurative chains that women wear in a society dominated by men.

Catherine R. Stimpson said "Lesbianism represents a commitment of skin, blood, breast, and bone." Lesbianism is a commitment not only to ourselves and our lovers, but to our lesbian community. If we don't spend time in a lesbian community, no community can exist.

I'd like to include a quote from the Bradley's *Thendara House* has always struck me as very wise. Mother Lauria said, "Nothing is ever as good or as bad as you think it will be." Here are a list of resources for all you readers out there, since these

took me some hunting!

- [1] Caeia March. *Between the Worlds*. Womens Pr Ltd, 1999.
- [2] Dana Shugar. *Separatism and women's community*. University of Nebraska Press, 1995.
- [3] Marilyn Frye. *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, chapter Some Reflections on Separatism and Power., pages 406-414. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- [4] Marion Zimmer Bradley. *The Shattered Chain*. DAW, 1976.
- [5] Marion Zimmer Bradley. *The Bloody Sun and To Keep the Oath*. ACE, 1979.
- [6] Marion Zimmer Bradley. *Thendara House*. DAW, 1983.
- [7] Marion Zimmer Bradley. *City of Sorcery*. DAW, 1984.
- [8] Marion Zimmer Bradley. *The Saga of the Renunciates (Darkover Omnibus, 3)*. DAW, 2002.
- [9] Michal Brody. *Are We There Yet? a Continuing History of Lavender Women: A Chicago Lesbian Newspaper, 1971-1976*. Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1991.
- [10] Sarah Hoagland. *Lesbian Ethics*. Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1989.

- [11] Sarah Hoagland and Julia Penelope. *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology*. Onlywomen Press, 1992.



(Poetry) Cannibalism

In the same way
that cannibals
carefully file
down their teeth
and press the inks
beneath their skin
I prepare myself
for the renewed
daily battle.
I whittle away
the soft lines of me,
learning to growl
to convince myself
of my power
to protect my
body that bleeds.

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(Poetry) Love Poem Love

*... how you haunt me ...
... how I want you gone...*

you've grown into my
origin myth

the earth swallows
itself, and always it
has your face,
reborn laced with salt

nothing new can grow
yet all I notice is
the blissful breeze
again ... again

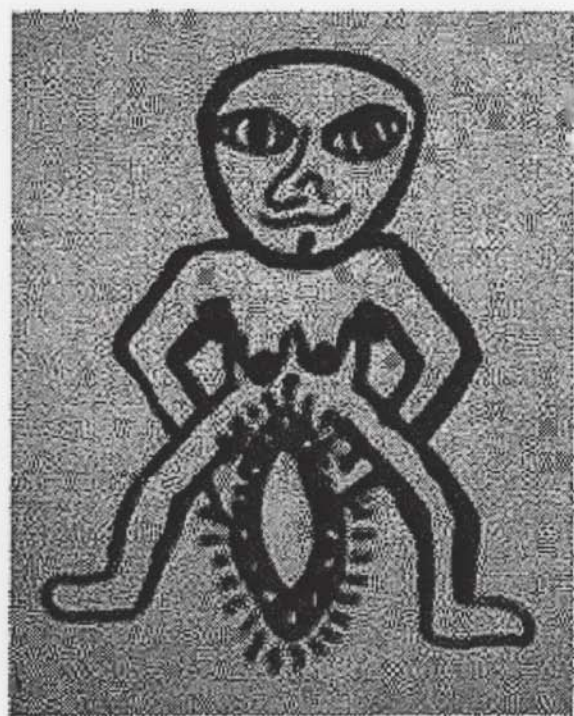
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Sheela-na-gigs

A Sheela-na-gig is a stone carvings of an old woman or hag squatting and displaying her (often exaggerated) vulva. These carvings are found on old Norman abbeys, convents, and churches in the British Isles; they often appear over doorways or under the eaves. Sheela-na-gigs are claimed by the wiccan community, but there are many interpretations of what they mean (yoni magic, fertility, good luck, etc.). Recently many sheelas have been defaced or destroyed by people who think that a carving of women with genitals is lewd or inappropriate for a church.

The most interesting interpretation of these sheela carvings is the good luck charm, or way to avert the evil eye. This interpretation stems from an old Irish tradition that the devil cannot stand the sight of a woman's genitals. (A tradition that provides a humorous clash of ideas with today's conservatives who deface sheelas!)

All in all, the sheela-na-gig seems like a powerful way to tie cunt-power into a tradition. And so I ask – wouldn't this be a great symbol for the lesbian community to embrace? Here we have a woman who is obviously a woman, and displaying her womanhood brazenly. And yet she isn't sexualized – she's free from the male gaze or any hint of trying to please the male gaze. Incredible!



(Poetry) Letter Writing

"and why do i know your name?"

This is a Fairytale
I like to tell myself:

squeeze a soul from
a scrawl of ink

left by your pen,
and through the
well wrung verbs
I can see you -

cocky and shy,
my golden
Marlene Dietrich.

You punch my arm,
and I laugh.

I would write you
if you would write back.

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(Poetry) In-Communicado

"I will never be the same" - MLE

After 6 years of beating
I felt I'd cracked your skull.
Warmth oozed over my fingernails
But it was my hands that bled.

Beneath your alabaster
authority I sought
THE SHE. THE RAGE. THE HEAT.
The opinion without any fact.

My blood, not yours. Which is cold.

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Review of Emma Donoghue's *Stir Fry*

Emma Donoghue's *Stir Fry* is the sweetly realistic story of a college girl in Dublin realizing she is a lesbian and falling in love. The main character, Maria, is a new college student, and answers an advertisement for a room to rent. Her new flat-mates turn out to be a lesbian couple. Donoghue's characters are so well drawn that a reader feels as much for the flat-mates, or Maria's awkward almost-boyfriends, as her budding lesbian romance. She lets us know her characters through their obnoxious habits and mistakes as much as for their witty conversations and virtues; they become real people.

Throughout the story Donoghue winds the haunting image of women without hands; women who are powerless, or indecisive. Lovers of the romance genre will find plenty to like in this book, while general fiction readers will be pulled in by Donoghue's skillful writing.

**(Poetry) Reading Vita in the summer-
time**

Lying beneath the elven branches
of my Carambola.

I've weathered every storm
this year sent.
too many.

Now I want to inscribe
my name in some hearth stone
And retire to a tower to write.

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Review of Jay Taverner's *Something Wicked*

Taverner's *Something Wicked*, the third in a series of books about a cottage in rural Shropshire, is sometimes called a mystery and sometimes a lesbian romance. The main character, Scotty, flees her life in London to stay with friends in Shropshire after losing her job and her girlfriend in short succession. In Shropshire she finds a lovely young librarian who is being battered by her husband. However the more engaging romance is not that between the two women, but the slow process of Scotty falling in love with the neglected cottage and the people of Shropshire. *Something Wicked* is the story of a lesbian falling in love with a community, and finding her place in the flow of history.

(Poetry) Courting the Other Rock

Flies swarm ornamental bushes
following the first frost -
those bushes that lay down a carpet
bruised by ice, maraschino red.

It spongily rots into a sodden feast.
Leaves shimmer under the shadey
hunger
of flies that will themselves
soon be casualties of the climate.

It all stands a ponderous testament
to the age of this place -
for in their efficiency,
landscapers no longer plant female
bushes.

It's a cynical time of year.
Gathered together, people smell more

and more of old food.
The distance is setting in, an

involuntary white separation
between breath and air.

The sun occasionally trickles free
of its condensed milk packaging,
but without it's former ardour to dance,
even if skin were a visible dance floor.

Now the only connection left
is summer eyes across a dark paneled
room
and a voice that tingles in palms
and the soles of my feet.

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In the Next Issue....

Well readers, in the next issue I plan to take on Sappho. I'd also like to re-read and review for you some of Nicola Griffith's writing. Plus, I plan to write out my reactions to Sarah Hoagland's *Lesbian Ethics*, and some thoughts on the lesbian publishing industry today. Remember, since this is a special sneak-peak pre-issue, the next issue will have everything here and more! Stay tuned....

Resources

- WMST-L <http://research.umbc.edu/korenman/wmst/wmst-l.html>
- Feminist Reprise, a source for many out of print radical lesbian feminist articles <http://www.feminist-reprise.myeweb.net/>

Comments? – questions?

email me at:

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Sappho Fr. 52 The moon has set, and the
Pleiades; it is midnight, time is going by, and
I sleep alone. – translated by H. T. Wharton

The library....



... a hotbed of lesbian action